



Congressman Lee M. Zeldin

First Congressional District of New York

April 14, 2017

The Honorable Dr. David Shulkin
Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary Shulkin,

Thank you for your response of March 22, 2017. However, I believe it does not go far enough in addressing the most pressing issues that I brought up in my initial letter. I promised the veterans of my congressional district that I would make their needs a priority and they are holding me to that promise by demanding accountability for our VA medical center.

Throughout the years, I have heard high praise from many veterans across Long Island who have had nothing but a very positive experience at the Northport VAMC; however, there have been specific and very serious allegations that have been made to my office, which cannot be ignored. Since we began hearing from patients and employees in 2015, we have seen very little effort to actually address and fix the recurring issues at Northport VAMC. The facility infrastructure problems are apparent. House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Phil Roe expressed wide ranging concerns about management of the facilities in his April 6, 2017 letter, and I am committed to continuing to work with him to investigate the root causes of these problems. Disappointingly, when those facility issues affect patient care and employee welfare, communication from the VA has not been timely. As of today, my office has received no update to a March 1, 2017 e-mail detailing the failure of two cooling towers on February 24, 2017 that provided chilled-air to critical areas. This delay and subsequent lack of follow-up causes me to be concerned about a growing lack of transparency between the medical center, patients, staff and local congressional offices.

My office receives ongoing reports of substandard working conditions, from environmental hazards to disrespectful treatment by supervisors and service heads. We continually hear allegations of poor air quality which, reportedly, resulted in employees becoming sick or leaving Northport altogether to protect their health. Verbal abuse, disparaging remarks about race, sexual identity and disability and retaliation, including threats and damage to property, have also been documented by my office.

These continue to be the types of issues my office fields on a regular basis. My hope would be that the new Northport VAMC administration would come with fresh ideas about how best to deal with these pervasive problems. The "minimum qualifications" are simply not good enough to address the myriad needs there.

You mentioned in your letter that one nominee would be selected for each medical center from the best-qualified candidates interviewed. Would you please provide more details about the selection process for a Director-level role? Is there a minimum required time of service in a similar managerial-type role? Who ultimately is responsible for selecting the final candidate? While experience is certainly an important characteristic for the next medical center administration, transparency, accountability and communication are very much as well. I would hope that the next Director of Northport VAMC would have the willingness to make an honest assessment of the center's deficiencies and be given the flexibility to take corrective action including terminating problem employees and putting an end to the alleged culture of intimidation and retaliation.

To that end, I would suggest that the very subjects in this letter are brought up at some point before a final selection is made to ensure that we are getting an administrator who is ready to take on these challenges and who is equipped with information and support from all stakeholders in order to be successful from day one.

If there are any additional questions regarding this matter, please contact my aide, Cleveland Johnson, at (631) 289-1097 or Cleveland.Johnson@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,



Lee Zeldin
Member of Congress